

Henry Northcote (IA henrynorthcote00snairich).pdf/13



Exported from Wikisource on September 14, 2024

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SHEPHERD'S INN, FLEET STREET

Northcote sat in his chambers in Shepherd's Inn. Down below was Fleet Street, in the thrall of a bitter December twilight. A heavy and pervasive thaw pressed its mantle upon the gaslit air; a driving sleet numbed the skin and stung the eyes of all who had to face it. Pools of slush, composed in equal parts of ice, water, and mud, impeded the pavements. They invaded the stoutest boots, submerged those less resolute, and imposed not a little inconvenience upon that section of the population which, unaddicted to the wearing of boots, had dispensed with them altogether.

The room in which Northcote kept was no more than a large and draughty garret, which abutted from the northern end of a crazy rectangular building on this curious byway of the world's affairs. Only a few decrepit tiles, a handful of rotten laths, and a layer of cracked plaster intervened between him and the night. The grate had no fire in it; there was no carpet to the floor. A table and two chairs were the sole furniture, and in a corner could be heard the stealthy drip of icy water as it percolated through the roof.

The occupant of the room sat in a threadbare overcoat with the collar turned up to his ears. His hands, encased in a pair

of woollen gloves, which were full of holes, were pressed upon his knees;

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